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Origins of sin and paths to redemption: A brief analysis of Christian atonement and Islamic teachings

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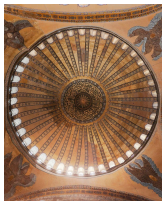

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The majority of humanity across the world ascribes to two religions: Christianity and Islam. Both religions teach that there is One God and that humankind is consumed by sin; the only way to overcome it is through a sincere relationship with the One God. However, Christians believe that the Godhead consists of three parts: the Father (God himself), the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit. Followers of both are taught to supplicate to their Creator for help in fighting it and they are taught that there will be the Final Judgement, where sin is completely wiped out and purification from sin prevails after the second advent of the Promised Messiah.

Where the two differ is how sin came and how one conquers the self, inciting to evil.

The Christian doctrine of original sin and atonement

In Christianity, the Bible teaches that sin originated with Adam and Eve. Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden tree of the *knowledge of good and evil*, and gave fruit to her husband. (Genesis3:6; Romans 5:12).

As a result, the earth was plagued with sin and death, with the latter applying to all living things. With evil being so prominent in the world, God devised many plans to rid the world of sin. As humankind multiplied over the generations, God was unhappy with his creation to the point of regret. (Genesis 6:5-7; 6:13; 6:17)

Except for Noah (Genesis 6:8; 6:18), God intended to completely destroy humankind with a global flood, and so He did. After that, the Lord promised not to flood the earth again. (Genesis 8:21)

After that, Prophets were sent to the offspring of Noah. From Abraham to Moses, and from Moses to Jacob, prophethood existed. After Jacob's demise, the prophetic institution continued within his line, the House of Israel, while the rest of humankind was forsaken.

An abundance of messengers were sent to the 12 tribes of Israel, and each time they went astray, God sent prophets to bring them back to the Torah. However, with the passing of time, that didn't work out either, as God sent the Babylonians against Israel, raising their temple to the ground and punishing the Jews into exile. (*2 Kings 25; 2 Chronicles 36*)

Only the tribes of Levi, Benjamin, and Judah were allowed to return by the time the Persian Empire took over. (*Ezra* 1)

The return of these three tribes was still not enough, and 400 years later, the Lord, according to the Christian perspective, sent His Son, Jesus, to sacrifice himself on the cross in order to rescue the world from sin. (*Galatians* 3:13; *Philippians* 2:6-11; 1 John 2:2) Through the crucifixion, he was described by Paul as the second Adam because the first Adam caused sin, God forbid, while the second Adam lifted sin.

With Jesus's ascension to heaven, he is expected to return and completely purify the world from sin.

Christian view: No sin is forgiven except by accepting Christ's death on the cross

With Christ having died on the cross, Christians are taught that the only way for sin to be overcome and forgiven is to accept that Christ has died on the cross. By accepting what they describe as "grace", all sins are forgiven. The penalty of death for sinners was paid for when the Messiah *died*.

Paul said:

"For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." (*Galatians* 3:10)

"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." (*Galatians* 3:13)

The Islamic teaching on sin and the divine attribute of All-Merciful

As a contrast to Christian doctrine, Islam teaches that sin is the responsibility of every man individually (Surah an-Najm, Ch.53: V.39), and the way to overcome sin is through sincere belief, seeking forgiveness [*istighfar*] and the good works that come with it.

Islam teaches that it is the influence of the environment that causes one to sin. It is said in a *hadith* that all humans are born pure:

"No child is born except on *al-fitrah* (i.e., the true nature) and then his parents make him Jewish, Christian or Magian." (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Tafsir, Hadith 4775)

The hadith further goes on to say that the Prophet[sa] quoted the Holy Quran regarding *al-fitrah*:

"So set thy face to [the service of] religion as one devoted [to God. And follow] the nature made by Allah – the nature in which He has created mankind. There is no altering the creation of Allah. That is the right religion. But most men know not." (Surah ar-Rum, Ch.30: V.31)

In another *hadith*, it is said:

"The pen has been lifted from three: from the child until he reaches puberty, from the sleeper until he wakes up and from the insane until he regains his sanity." (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith 940)

This verse and the *ahadith* mentioned above make it clear that sin isn't inherited but rather the influence of the environment. Every man is born sinless, and a child is not held to account until they mature, meaning they have matured enough to consciously make their own decisions.

In overcoming sin, Muslims are taught that the soul has three stages: The self that incites evil (Surah Yusuf, Ch.12: V.54), the reproving self (Surah Al-Qiyamah, Ch.75: V.3), and the soul at rest (Surah al-Fajr, Ch.89: V.28).

Nafs-i-Ammarah: The self that incites to evil

In his book, *Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam*, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who claimed to be the Promised Messiah[as] wrote:

"[I]t is characteristic of the human self that it incites man to evil and is opposed to his attainment of perfection and to his moral state, and urges him towards undesirable and evil ways. Thus the propensity towards evil and intemperance is a human state which predominates over the mind of a person before he enters upon the moral state. This is man's natural state, so long as he is not guided by reason and understanding but follows his natural bent in eating, drinking, sleeping, waking, anger and provocation, like the animals. When a person is guided by reason and understanding and brings his natural state under control and regulates it in a proper manner, then these three states, as described, cease to remain natural states, but are called *moral states*, as shall also be discussed later." (*Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam* [English], p. 4)

Nafs-i-Lawwamah: The Reproving Self

In regards to this spiritual state, Hazrat Ahmad[as] states:

"This reproving self is the second source of human state from which the moral state is generated. At this stage, man ceases to resemble the animals. Calling it to witness is for the purpose of doing it honour as if by advancing from the state of the self that is prone to evil and arriving at the state of the reproving self, it has become worthy of honour in divine estimation. It is so-called as it reproves man on vice and is not reconciled to man's submitting to his natural desires and leading an unbridled existence like the animals. It desires that man should be in a good state and should practise good morals, and no kind of intemperance should be manifested in any aspect of human life, and natural emotions and desires should be regulated by reason.

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"As it reproves every vicious movement, it is called the reproving self. Though it reproves itself in respect of vices, yet it is not fully effective in practising virtue and occasionally it is dominated by natural emotions, when it stumbles and falls. It is like a weak child who does not wish to stumble and fall but does so out of weakness, and is then remorseful over his infirmity. In short, this is the moral state of human self when it seeks to comprehend within itself high moral qualities and is disgusted with disobedience, but cannot achieve complete success." (*The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam* [English], pp. 5-6)

The Promised Messiah[as] alludes to the fact that man is a creature of habit and that habits are created through constant repetition. That is why the Quran often places much emphasis on the doing of good to get closer to Allah, the very definition of the Islamic traditions, *sunnah* (habits or way). The doing of good establishes good morals. At this stage, due to the weakness of man, he still has setbacks.

Nafs-i-Mutma'innah: The soul at rest

"This is the stage when the soul of a person being delivered from all weaknesses is filled with spiritual powers and establishes a relationship with God Almighty without Whose support it cannot exist. As water flowing down from a height, on account of its volume and the absence of any obstruction, rushes with great force, in the same way, the soul at rest flows towards God. That is indicated by the divine direction to the soul that has found comfort in God to return to its Lord. It undergoes a great transformation in this very life and is bestowed with a paradise while still in this world. As this verse indicates in its direction for such a soul to return to its Lord, it is nourished by its Lord and its love of God becomes its nurture, and it drinks at this fountain of life and is thus delivered from death. This is indicated at another place in the Holy Quran where Allah, the Exalted, has said:

قَدْ اَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكّٰىهَا وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسّٰىهَا

"[(Surah ash-Shams, Ch.91: V.10-11)]

"That is, he who purifies his soul of earthly passions shall be saved and shall not suffer ruin, but he who is overcome by his earthly passions should despair of life." (*Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam* [English], pp. 7-8)

This is the stage where man has completely purged himself of sin, but is now completely dependent on the Will of Allah and acts in accordance with the Will of Allah. This stage is again alluded to by the Promised Messiah[as] in *Barahin-e-Ahmadiyya*.

"This state comes about when God loves them and a burning flame of His love—which can be called the spirit for their spiritual being—descends upon their hearts and gives them a second life. This spirit brings light and life to their entire spiritual being. In this state their devotion to the remembrance of God is not out of artificiality or pretence, but rather God, who has made the physical being of man dependent on food and water, links their spiritual life, which is so dear to them, to the food of His remembrance. Hence, they love this food more than they love physical food and water, and are fearful lest they lose it. All this is the result of the spirit that is put into them like a flame, which inebriates them with the love of God's love. Therefore, they do not wish to be separated from His remembrance even for a single moment." (*Barahin-e-Ahmadiyya* [English], Part V, pp. 293-294)

Conclusion

Whereas Christianity says that sin is a generational curse caused by Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden tree and the only way to overcome that curse is through accepting the Messiah's supposed sacrifice on the cross as a payment for those sins, Islam states sin comes from the environment as every man is born pure and presents the three stages of man in overcoming sin: the self that incites to evil, the reproving self, and the soul at rest through the gradual acquisition of good habits with the help of Allah.

Therefore, I have argued that Islam presents a much more realistic way of overcoming sin, as it is consistent with the nature of human psychology and allows for the development of the human self. With Christianity, our potential is capped because the doctrine of original sin states that no one is good enough to conquer sin and therefore, only the Messiah pays for those sins through his supposed punishment on the cross.

Islam argues that this false doctrine of Christianity takes away from the responsibility of man being the bearer of his own sins.

To conclude this, I'll end this article with two verses comparing the two theologies of Christianity and Islam that best summarise this subject:

1. "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (*Galatians* 3:13)

2. "That no bearer of burden shall bear the burden of another; And that man will have nothing but what he strives for." (*Quran, Surah an-Najm*, 53:39-40)

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